Building a New Water Culture in Spain

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Spain's water policy and management system are undergoing profound changes as conflicts mount between traditional stakeholders and newly empowered water users.

Writers: Nuria Hernández-Mora & Francesc La Roca

For over 100 years, water policy and management in Spain have been instruments of economic and social transformation. Significant public and private investments in water supply infrastructures have equipped Spain with over 1,200 major dams, 20 major desalination plants – with more under construction – and several inter-basin water transfers. The system has been apparently very successful, with an increase in overall water availability, strong associated economic development and few urban water supply shortages. This success has been supported by a widespread consensus among a strong and largely closed water policy community made up of water managers, irrigators, electric (hydropower) utilities and developers.

However, today this historical agreement is in crisis. The environmental damages caused by past policies are now evident, but there are still unsatisfied claims for water, especially in those regions with devastated water ecosystems, such as the Segura, Júcar or Tajo river basins. On the other hand, there is a growing ecological consciousness that is supported in its claims by the water policy objectives of the European Union (EU) Water Framework Directive (WFD). Water users and stakeholders who previously had little say in policy decisions are also contesting the long-term privileges of large historic water users with long-term use rights over water. In addition, the growing power of the country's autonomous regions means that inter-regional conflicts over water allocation decisions are becoming more frequent.

Opposing grand plans

Today, Spain's water policy and management system is in transition. The origins of this transformation can be traced back to the 1993 Draft National Hydrologic Plan, known colloquially as Plan Borrell, after the minister responsible for drafting it. The plan was largely inspired by early 20th-century ideals of aiding economic development by moving large volumes of water from the humid north to more arid south-eastern regions through a series of publicly funded large inter-basin water transfers.

For the first time in Spanish hydraulic history, the proposed plan encountered strong opposition from a variety of new policy actors who questioned traditional water policy goals. These new actors included donor regions that questioned the role of water as a motor of national economic development and demanded a greater say in management decisions, and an environmental movement that had been growing in importance since the transition to democracy in the mid-1970s. Portugal, which until then was hardly a relevant player in Spanish water policy decisions, also voiced its opposition to the plan because of potential downstream impacts in shared international river basins.

The Borrell Plan was defeated in Parliament in 1995 and in 1996 a conservative government came to power. The new government approved river basin management plans and in 2000 proposed a new National Hydrologic Plan. The 2000 plan was less ambitious than the 1993 version, but its strategic objective continued to be the historical goal of reaching a "general water balance in Spain". The main feature of this project was the annual transfer of some 1,000Mm3 from the mouth of the Ebro River to Valencia, Murcia and Almeria in the east and south-east, and to Barcelona in the north.

This time the proposed plan encountered a well-organized and informed opposition from regional governments in donor regions, strong social and environmental movements, and a wide academic and scientific community that questioned the project's viability on environmental, economic, social and regional equity grounds. Particularly relevant was a strong coalition of citizen organizations that included regionally based social movements, such as the Association in Defense of the Ebro Delta in the Lower Ebro in Catalonia and COAGRET (Association of People Affected by Large Dams and Water Transfers), with a strong presence in Aragon, where many of the new dams would have had to be built. Other associations included well-established environmental groups, such as WWF-Spain, SEO/Birdlife and Ecologists in Action, as well as a strong group of academics and technical experts organized around the Foundation for a New Water Culture.

This coalition carried out an effective and coordinated strategy that involved social mobilization in donor and recipient basins; public education and outreach efforts; an effective advocacy campaign in the EU (that was to provide funding support for the project); and the publication of countless studies and reports questioning the projects' socioeconomic viability and environmental impacts. Scientists and experts affiliated to the Foundation for a New Water Culture were also instrumental in articulating the principles underpinning new water management and policy goals, embodied under the concept of the New Water Culture. This new paradigm advocated for a shift in water policy away from large projects causing irreversible environmental and social impacts, towards a greater focus on demand-side solutions and public participation.

Although the Popular Party majority government approved the plan in 2001, it was ultimately shelved as a result of the European Commission's reluctance to provide funds for the project, mass protests in Madrid, Barcelona and Brussels, and the socialist victory in the 2004 Spanish national election.

New battles

20 desalination plants along the Mediterranean coast (from Barcelona to Almeria) to provide the water that would otherwise have been supplied through the Ebro transfer. At the same time the implementation of the EU-WFD was prioritized, with an increased emphasis on economic rationality, demand management, ecological conservation and social participation.

However, the reaction of the traditional water policy community was effective enough to change the course of action after the 2008 reelection of the socialist government. The new management team in the Ministry of the Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs – which is responsible for water policies – was unable to complete the planning process under the EU-WFD, which is still largely blocked, while the inter-regional conflict gained momentum. New national elections in 2011 have once again changed the territorial balance of power, producing a new political map dominated by the conservative party, both at national and regional levels. It is still unclear how the new political context will affect water policies and planning.

However, whatever the outcome of this new political period, new players and actors are now part of policy debates over water in Spain. New management goals and priorities are an integral part of the policy-making process so that water is no longer at the exclusive service of sectoral policies. The New Water Culture philosophy is now an essential component of water management debates and is inspiring similar debates in other areas, such as land use and transportation. Traditional stakeholders continue to resist changes, but water management in Spain is today clearly undergoing an irreversible transformation.

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Martin Hernández Ortiz is an expert in water policy and governance and the President of the Foundation for a New Water Culture (FNCA). Francesc La Roca is professor of applied